DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 108 SO 020 017

AUTHOR Sullivan, Kathryn C.
TITLE Reading a Painting: Student Comprehension of Important Works of Art.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Education; *Aesthetic Values; *Art; *Art Appreciation; *Art Education; Art History; Curriculum Enrichment; Educational Trends; Instructional Improvement; Painting (Visual Arts); Secondary Education; *Visual Literacy
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetics; *Discipline Based Art Education; Getty Center for Education in the Arts

ABSTRACT

In 1899, the Committee of Ten on Drawing, organized by the National Education Association, proposed that one of the main goals of art education should be "to offer a consistent development in the faculty of sight." Art appreciation was centered on the literal translation of the painting. Importance was placed on connecting the painter's name with the painting and attaching a date to it. More recently, the Getty Center for Education in the Arts has taken an active role in promoting the discipline-based art education programs in schools, in which aesthetics plays a major part. Young students can develop a level of self-awareness as they realize that a painting can have a meaning, an emotion, and a value that exists beyond their own reality. Elliot Eisner feels that "aesthetic ways of knowing" can expand consciousness and intellectual ability, allowing students to experience the profound statements made by artists throughout history. How the teacher presents important works of art to students predicates their response. Junior and senior high school art teachers should: (1) limit the number of slides shown in each class; (2) choose discussion topics and then find artwork that conveys that particular idea or feeling; (3) verbalize emotions when describing a painting; (4) help students explore symbolism in paintings; (5) tell the story/mythology of the painting; (6) validate students' responses to paintings; and (7) allow students to find artwork that conveys certain feelings or emotions. A bibliography is included. (GEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED309108

Reading a Painting:

Student comprehension of important works of art.

Kathryn C. Sullivan

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kathryn C. Sullivan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Reading a painting:

Student comprehension of important works of art.

In 1899, the Committee of Ten on Drawing, organized by the National Education Association,proposed that one of the main goals of art education should be "to offer a consistent development in the faculty of sight" (Wilson, 1971). For many years, art appreciation was centered on the literal translation of the painting. What is the center of interest? How are the elements related to each other? Importance was placed on connecting the painter's name with the painting and attaching a date to it. Subsequently, an anecdotal approach was adopted, whereby facts of the painter's life were introduced. Even today, mnemonic devices are taught to enable a viewer to memorize those facts. This tendency to equate art appreciation with art history has led, I believe, to a dissection of art that denies an enlightened comprehension of the work. The student may see a painting as "antique", one of those facts of history that are unrelated to today's reality and therefore unimportant. The dilemma for the art teacher is how to help a student comprehend the importance of a particular work of art. Visual training has long been a goal of art education, but the methods have been obscure and, I feel, unproductive. The visual aesthetic experience is one that can not be studied. It is, rather, an experience in perception.

> Aesthetic experience is defined as an open and active confrontation with an art object or event during which the individual performs a visual

> analysis of the multitude of qualities and aspects present in the situation. He attends to sensory qualities and their formal composition, media, technique, mood and feeling, literal and symbolic meanings, and also to the relationship of these aspects to his own feelings toward the situation (Wilson, 1971).

More recently, the Getty Center for Education in the Arts has taken a powerfully active role in promoting the discipline-based art education programs in schools, in which aesthetics plays a major part. To what purpose should a teacher interject aesthetics into their curriculum? Young students can develop a level of self-awareness as they realize that a painting can have a meaning, an emotion, a value that exists beyond their own reality. The experience can take the students from an ego-centric response to art to an enlarged sense of self as a member of a community or society. M.J. Parsons (1987) has studied the cognitive developmental stages in responding to a painting. The early stages are ego-centric, based on an immediate, personal response to a work of art. In stage five, the most advanced, the viewing of a painting becomes a dialogue whereby one observes, questions and reinterprets the categories of one's own inner life. The viewer becomes aware of his or her reactions as being either universal or idiosyncratic and therefore not relevant. As the intellectual development of the person progresses, the ability to perceive more in a painting follows hand in hand. In fact, the connection between visual literacy and intellectual development is an important one.

J. McFee is quoted by Wilson (1971):

> Visual training increases the wealth of material the children have to work with....If it is used to motivate visual curiosity and exploration it should widen the range of creative students...They will go beyond cognitive categorizing and see many more details and significant relations as they respond to their environment, both visually and cognitively.

Art educator Elliot Eisner has been a strong promotor of "connoisseurship" (Buescher, 1986) in student curriculum. He believes in multiple forms of literacy, not the least of which is visual. As we increase the avenues for comprehension, we increase the number of students who can actively participate. Eisner feels that these "aesthetic ways of knowing" (Buescher, 1986) can expand consciousness and intellectual ability. This form of literacy is necessary for students to be able to experience the profound statements that have been made by artists throughout history. According to Jung, the artist is an instrument and a spokesman of the spirit of his age. He gives form to the nature and values of his time (Jaffe, 1964). This connection between art and society is another important reason for the inclusion of aesthetics in the art program. Hamblen (1988) suggests that aesthetics be used in a new light, one in which the problematic aesthetic issues would be studied in relationship to their larger social consciousness. This, I feel, would bring the art work into a more immediate context for the student viewer.

Aesthetics has long been a topic of esoteric theorizing which, I feel, has kept its clearer intentions and possible benefits out of the classroom. Art teachers are left with vague concepts and the dilemma of how to present a work of art in a manner that will arouse the students' interest and increase their comprehension. It would behoove the teacher to understand the ways in which a student perceives a painting. There is the initial immediate response which may be conscious or unconscious. It may be a simple "look and see" approach (Perkins, 1988). This is a valid response, in and of itself, but can lead to a loss of interest. If the student looks and does not see anything worthwhile or interesting, then the painting itself is not worthwhile. It is important to carry a student beyond the immediate judgment. Based on the student's existing knowledge and level of intellectual development, he or she can begin translating the visual aspects of the painting into the verbal. After this verbal translation, reordering and rearranging skills are necessary for a description of the meaning of the painting. As the student determines what is essential, the less transparent aspects of the painting are being comprehended. Research done by Koroscik, Osman & DeSouza (1988) indicates that "the nature of information comprehended from art has as much to do with the viewer's existing knowledge or cognitive structures as with characteristics of the art stimulus itself". It is, therefore, crucial to bring into play the student's previous experiences and knowledge. Verbalizing can stimulate the student's memory, facilitating

comprehension beyond what is possible when the response is non-verbal. The teacher's skill in questioning plays an important role in this process. By raising questions that invite inquiry, the students can be further stimulated to draw on their own knowledge and ability to make connections. Perception is, after all, the ability to perceive relationships. And it is the dynamic tension inherent in the relationships between all objects or ideas that creates the energy of our environment. The benefit of this "perceptual practice" in everyday life in undeniable.

How the teacher presents important works of art to the students predicates their response. I would therefore like to propose a few ideas for the teacher of a junior or senior high school art program:

1. Limit the number of slides to be shown in any one class. Choose the slides carefully, considering their relationship with each other and their ability to elicit response. Example: the contrast between the "Madonna Enthroned" paintings by Cimabue, Duccio & Giotto.
2. Choose a topic for discussion and then find artwork that conveys that particular idea or feeling. Ask students how the artist translates the idea. How would the students express the concept? Example: the political message of Goya's "The Third of May".
3. Verbalizing emotions can be a challenge, but it is a healthy practice. Some paintings are very clearly emotional stories that can be easily read. Use paintings as a point of departure for a discussion of a topic close to the hearts of

the students. Examples: Degas' "The Glass of Absinthe" or Rembrandt's "Bathsheba".

4. Symbolism is an important visual perception in our search for understanding of our place in time. Jung states that there are four functions of consciousness necessary to deal with the impressions of our world: thought, feeling, intuition and sensation (Jaffe, 1964). Validating students' unconscious reactions to a painting will allow their thoughts to be expressed on a conscious level. Looking for symbolism in paintings is a worthwhile exercise and can be approached superficially as a "treasure hunt". Examples: the paintings of De Chirico or Chagall.
5. Our American culture is singularly lacking in its own mythology. Many works of art are based on myths or religious concepts. A complete understanding of these paintings is impossible without some prior knowledge. Telling the story of a painting can be entertaining as well as stimulating, as the discussion could lead toward the creation of a new mythology within the classroom. Example: Botticelli's "Birth of Venus".
6. It is also important to validate the student's own personal response and explanation of a painting. The teacher could show a slide and ask each student to come up with his or her own title and explain the meaning. This would reinforce the individual's confidence in his or her own instincts and ability to perceive meanings. Examples: Rousseau's "The Dream" or Munch's "The Scream".

7. The teacher might approach this process going backwards: Give the students a topic (idea, emotion, statement, etc.) and let them look through art books to find a work of art that they feel is connected to the topic. Comprehension would come through their own searching. Examples: the topics of "loneliness" or "social injustice".

The goal of these exercises is to promote a visual literacy that enables the student to see relationships that exist in everything around us. It stretches the cognitive knowledge to make connections between images. Art history is a visual memory of our cultural growth and is reflected in each and every one of us.For the art student it is imperative to tie into that feeling of connectedness that flows through the history of paintings. To be able to visually read those messages that silently speak to us is to be able to touch the human spirit.

References

Buescher, T. M. (1986). Appreciating children's aesthetic ways of knowing: An interview with Elliot Eisner. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 10, 7-15

Hamblen, K. A. (1988). Approaches to aesthetics in art education: A critical theory perspective. Studies in Art Education, 29, 81-90

Jaffe, A. (1964). Symbolism in the visual arts, in C. G. Jung (Ed.), Man and his symbols (pp. 230-271) Garden City, NY, Doubleday

Koroscik, J.S., Osman, A.H.,& DeSouza, I. (1988). The function of verbal mediation in comprehending works of art: A comparison of three cultures. Studies in Art Education, 29, 91-102.

Parsons, M.J. (1987). Talk about a painting: A cognitive developmental analysis. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 21, 37-55.

Perkins, D.N. (1988). Art as understanding. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 22, 111-131

Wilson, B.G. (1971). Evaluation of learning in art education. In B.S. Bloom, J.T. Hastings, G.F. Madaus (Eds.), Handbook on formative and summative evaluation of student learning (pp.499-558) McGraw-Hill.